

Uniform Discipline: A Good Indicator Of a Unit's Deeper Problems?

by Command Sergeant Major Kenneth O. Preston

Over the last several years, I've talked with a lot of young sergeants who, after several years in the Army, were choosing to return to the civilian work force. I asked these young, bright, noncommissioned officers, most of whom had earned the right to wear the rank of a sergeant in only a few years, why they were getting out. Their reply was that the Army was not what it used to be.

Based on the answers that I received from these potential future master gunners, platoon sergeants, first sergeants, and sergeants major, I asked them several more questions to try to understand their frustration and dissatisfaction with their military service. I asked, why do you feel the Army is not what it used to be? Their reply was that noncommissioned officers do not have the authority they used to. I asked, why do you feel that you have lost your authority? They replied that the new soldiers coming into the Army could do what they wanted. I asked, do these soldiers do what they want in violation of regulations, policies, and procedures? They responded that in many cases soldiers did what they wanted because they knew that they would not be punished. These young sergeants had given up trying to correct acts of indiscipline and making on-the-spot corrections.

It's taken a while to peel the onion back to really identify the root causes of the issues those sergeants raised over the last several years. Interesting enough is that the sergeants I spoke to, in different units spread all over the world, responded with very similar answers to the questions. One of the root causes of their dissatisfaction is basic discipline in units.

Over the last couple of years, I had the unfortunate opportunity to see first-hand the circumstances behind the death of two soldiers in separate incidents. Following both accidents, I visited the accident sites as part of the investigation team. The cause of death in both cases was attributed to not following established procedures or unsafe operation of a particular piece of equipment.

I was coming from a unit that had very specific uniform standards in the field. One of my observations upon arriving at the first accident site was the appearance of the senior leaders of the unit. I observed the commander of this particular unit wearing his personal weapon in a holster that was strapped to the side of his leg. His

LBE was not assembled as prescribed by unit policies. You may think this has little significance on the death of a soldier in training, but after looking at the discipline and standards of uniforms of all the soldiers in that particular unit, I questioned the level of discipline and their standards in safety, PMCS of equipment, weapons accountability, etc. But during this investigation, this thought was a theory.

At the second fatal accident site that I visited, I observed much the same individualism in uniform standards. Surprisingly, many of the nonconformations to the established uniform policies were by the senior leaders of the unit. Specifically, these leaders were the more senior NCOs, in the rank of SSG and above, the officers, and the warrant officers. The official cause of death for the soldier involved was not wearing a seat belt. However, my observations tied in with my theory that if uniform discipline was suspect, then what was the level of discipline in other areas? Is uniform discipline an indicator of the discipline in a unit?

I have recently spent a lot of time trying to understand why noncommissioned officers involved in acts of indiscipline made the decisions that compromised their integrity. Many of these incidents involved after-duty socialization between a sergeant and his young soldiers. After talking with the sergeants involved in two different incidents, I found that they were not held responsible for their soldiers in many areas. This is a very broad area of subjects that include accountability, training, and appearance. I believe both of these sergeants did not know they were accountable because the unit leadership did not hold them accountable.

After thinking about what a corporal or sergeant is responsible for, I've come to the following conclusions:

- When unit leaders do not conform to established policies pertaining to the wear and appearance of the uniform, they take authority away from our junior noncommissioned officers to make uniform corrections on their soldiers. In most cases, our young corporals and sergeants are responsible for two or three soldiers. One of the key areas that help the young leader step away from his peers and assume a position of authority is the opportunity to enforce standards and develop discipline in soldiers. Uniform discipline forms part

of the foundation of basic discipline that enables our junior leaders to become established in a position of authority.

- When senior leaders do not conform to established policies and procedures to an exact standard, they demonstrate that standards are not important. "Lead by example" is one of the eleven principles of leadership. This principle is a form of communication that sets the tone of discipline by senior leaders to their subordinate leaders. Junior leaders lose their position of authority to make on-the-spot corrections. Once this ability to make on-the-spot corrections goes away, these junior noncommissioned officers become less involved with their soldiers. In many cases they assume the role of a higher paid soldier and not a noncommissioned officer in a leadership role.

The next time you are at an official function where the attendees are wearing dress uniforms, notice how all the senior leaders will "check out" each other's uniforms for appearance. We cannot help ourselves; this was a trait that has developed in us over the years. My theory is that now, because many unit leaders do not hold their noncommissioned officers accountable for their soldiers' appearance, these junior noncommissioned officers are not developing their ability to see or correct substandard performance. By not developing this characteristic in our junior noncommissioned officers, you will see standards in all areas begin to drop. Look at units that have high or above-average vehicle accident rates during training, acts of indiscipline both on and off duty, loss of sensitive items, or duty-related soldier injuries. If you look at the appearance of soldiers in the field, those who conform to standards will be the exception and not the rule.

Soldiers deserve to be inspected everyday, in garrison and in the field. Give the authority to enforce uniform discipline back to our noncommissioned officers. In doing this, the number of discipline-related incidents would go down, the junior noncommissioned officers will have the authority they are seeking, and these young leaders we are growing will be much stronger. Additionally, we may not see as many violators of the earring policy on Saturday in the Commissary.

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